

# Point Mugu's Lead Archaeologist Makes a Significant Find

## Cave May Be the Lone Woman's Cave of San Nicolas Island

**LATE LAST YEAR**, Navy archaeologist Steven Schwartz discovered a hidden cave on San Nicolas Island which he believes may be the Lone Woman's.

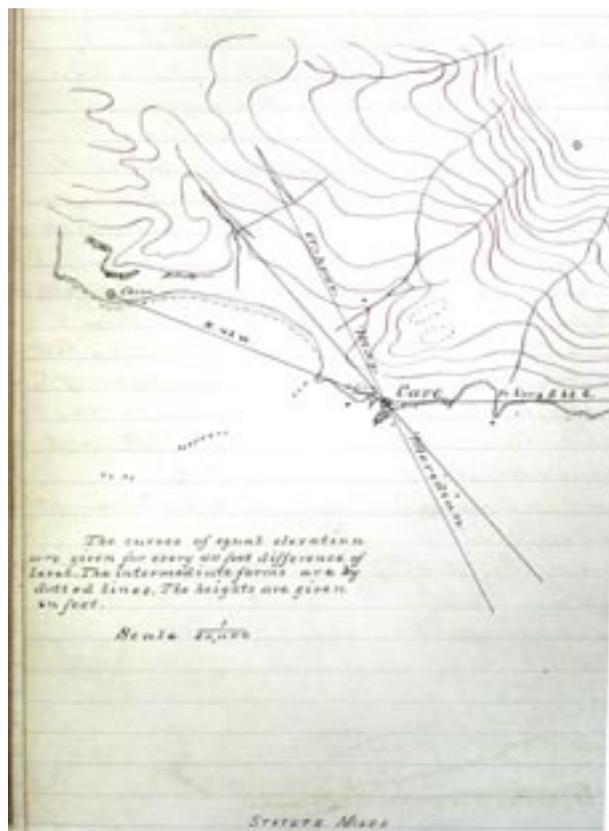
For more than 20 years Schwartz has been looking for the home of the Lone Woman, the inspiration for Scott O'Dell's 1960 Newbery Medal-winning novel *The Island of the Blue Dolphins*. The book is based on the abandonment and retrieval of an American Indian woman who lived alone on San Nicolas Island for 18 years (from 1835 to 1853), and Schwartz believes the cave he's uncovered may answer the question that has long eluded researchers: "How did she live for those 18 years?"

There are a number of sources that discuss cave sites on San Nicolas Island showing evidence of Indian occupation, but only one cave site had been discovered—the "Cave of the Whales." The Cave of the Whales contains pictographs and petroglyphs primarily depicting sea life such as killer whales. There is little evidence of occupation within the cave as this cave floor is located just above the high tide line, and during stormy weather waves would crash in making habitation unlikely.

During archaeological surveys conducted in recent decades, no cave site other than the Cave of the Whales had been located. This led to the conclusion that if there was a cave where the Lone Woman lived, it had either collapsed or been buried in the intervening decades.

During research into the ranching history of the island, a map was located which clarified the question of a second cave site. A U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey map by Stehman Forney in the summer of 1879 clearly shows the

location of the "Indian Cave." This cave is near, but definitely distinct from the Cave of the Whales. The map shows a survey station, named "Cave," using the normal symbol for a survey station, but near this, the annotation "Indian Cave" without the survey station symbol appears



The 1879 U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey map by Stehman Forney showing the location of the "Indian Cave."

Scott Byram

## The Basics About San Nicolas Island

**SAN NICOLAS ISLAND** is located in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Southern California, 60 miles south of Point Mugu. About nine miles long and three miles wide, the 14,562-acre island has been owned by the Navy since 1933 and serves as a weapons testing and training facility. San Nicolas Island is critical to performing the Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR) Sea Range's mission and provides a cornerstone for supporting a wide variety of test, evaluation, training and experimentation operations, including surface-to-air, surface-to-surface, air-to-air, air-to-surface, missile defense, fleet training, and large-scale joint experimentation scenarios. In conjunction with Navy Region Southwest's environmental team, the NAVAIR Range Sustainability Office, which includes archaeologists and environmental protection personnel, ensures that the testing can be conducted without compromising any of the island's resources whether historical, the flora or the fauna.



San Nicolas Island.  
*U.S. Navy photo*

to denote a specific place name. This map established the clear location of a second cave and erased all notions of the two caves being separate references to the same geographic feature.

During the next 20 years, various attempts were made to locate the cave. The map, while detailed, did not aid in the search of the cave because of the complex nature of the shoreline and the scale of the map.

“It was not possible to locate one specific spot as the location of the Indian Cave,” Schwartz said. “There were at least four topographic features in the immediate vicinity that could be evidence of a collapsed or buried cave.”

Surface surveys and auger and shovel sampling were conducted at all four locations with no success.

A recently obtained copy of the field notes which accompany the 1879 U.S. Coast Survey map from Scott Byram, a researcher at University of California, Berkeley, provided a more specific location for the cave and precise distance and bearing from the “Cave” survey station to the “Indian Cave” survey station.

With this very specific location and some help from California State University, Los Angeles (CSLA) students, the cave was finally located in early 2012. This involved clearing vegetation and removing some recently deposited sediments that were filling the cave. Excavations proceeded down to where a rounded sandstone boulder was found, likely indicating the floor of the cave. At that point, work by the team stopped so as not to impact the deposit or begin excavation without the proper approvals.



Entrance to cave site uncovered by a team from NAWCWD Point Mugu, with assistance from CSULA students, on San Nicolas Island.

*Richard Gutenberg*



Entrance to cave site .

*Richard Gutenberg*

As the site was being cleaned up for photographs, a glass bottle was recovered from the bottom of the cleared area. The bottle is a Gothic-style condiment bottle that dates between 1840 and 1865. Such a date would be consistent with the cave's use by the Lone Woman.

The thought that the cave was actually the home of the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island for those 18 lonely years brought Schwartz and the team to the question, "So what did she do for 18 years?" The team hopes this cave site will provide an answer once work resumes.

"It's very rare in archaeology to be able to pinpoint any find to a specific individual," Schwartz said. "To have such a narrow time period that you're looking at is exactly what we need to pinpoint the context of these finds. It's just something you never see around here."

The cave is currently referred to as the "Lost Indian Cave" due to the fact that its location was lost for many years. Once it can be firmly estab-



Steve Schwartz, who discovered the cave, points to an area above the cave entrance where the dig began.

*Patricia Sauers*



A gothic-style condiment bottle recovered from the cave entrance.

*Steve Schwartz*

lished that it was the home of the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island, it may then be referred to as the “Lone Woman Cave.”

“Our Navy archeologists work incredibly hard and are dedicated to being good stewards of the natural and cultural resources on San Nicolas Island,” said Patricia Sauers, of the NAVAIR Range Department. “Their efforts allow the Naval Air Warfare Center Weapons Division (NAWCWD) Point Mugu to continue its use of the island for testing in support of the warfighter. Having read the book in grade school and seeing the valuable history being discovered throughout the years on the island, I am inspired by the integrity of our folks working on this project and their continued perseverance in piecing together the true story of the Lone Woman as well as the many other untold stories on San Nicolas Island.” 📍

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